DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 384 878 CS 214 940

AUTHOR Langstraat, Lisa R.
TITLE Toward Mapping a Feminist Cultural Studies Approach to Composition.
PUB DATE 18 Mar 94
NOTE 11p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (45th, Nashville, TN, March 16-19, 1994).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Females; *Feminism; Higher Education; Males; Rhetoric; Rhetorical Theory; *Writing (Composition); *Writing Instruction
IDENTIFIERS Composition Theory; *Cultural Studies; Student Empowerment

ABSTRACT

At this time when feminist criticism is working its way into the field of composition and cultural studies, three issues call for discussion. First of all, composition because it is a "feminized" field as it has historically been defined as "women's work," it is a radically different terrain from cultural studies. A close scrutiny of institutional practices and constraints has always been a primary concern for cultural critique. Yet discussions of incorporating cultural studies in the composition classroom rarely consider how gendered division of labor in the field--its feminization--shapes the production, circulation, and reception of cultural critique in the composition classroom. The second issue important in redefining the territories of cultural studies and composition concerns the fact that the histories of cultural studies and critical education theory are markedly paternal. The fact is that despite the influence of feminist praxis on cultural critique, many models of culture remain largely uninformed by feminist theories of patriarchy. Finally, though the objects of attention have shifted to race, class, and gender, many current strategies for the composition classroom reflect the masculinist impulse of formalist approaches. Many are overly rationalized, overly politicized and, further, carry with them a kind of mind/body split. For them, empowering students often means calling on the logic of rationalism, which is frequently predicated on the exclusion of socially constructed others--women, people of color, and nature. (Contains 25 references.) (TB)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Lisa Langstraat
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

Lisa R. Langstraat
Purdue University
CCCC's 3/18/94

ED 384 878

Toward Mapping a Feminist Cultural Studies Approach to Composition

As my title suggests, I situate this paper within the spacial metaphors common in discussions of composition studies and cultural studies. Radically interdisciplinary, both fields blur territories of inquiry which the academy has historically defined as terra firma. This remapping of disciplinary landscapes has led many composition scholars to note the powerful similarities between composition and cultural studies. Both share a concern with the role of discourse in our social and political landscape, the ways in which meaning is produced within specific historical contexts, the struggle over definitions of literacy, and the means by which hegemony works to win and shape consent among subjects. Hence, Jim Berlin's call for the "collapsing boundaries" between cultural studies and composition and John Schilb's argument that the "geopolitical conditions" (187) of composition are better suited than literary studies for cultural critique. These revisionary landscapes seem particularly promising for feminist work in composition, for, as Gillian Rose has remarked, fixed boundaries, with their violent inclusions and exclusions, are integral for the perpetuation of hegemonic discourses (153).

It would seem that in its intersections with cultural studies' goals and methods, composition squirms out of its place as a service course within the university. But what are the spaces of

CS 214 940

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

feminism, of women, of the feminine within this shifting terrain? Certainly the influence of feminism on Birmingham cultural studies has been ruptural. As Anne Balsamo, Sarah Franklin, et al, Stuart Hall, and others suggest, feminist theory in cultural studies influenced a shift from an emphasis on ideology and class structures to an emphasis on the formation of subjectivity (Franklin 176; Schiach 42); the personal as political radically expanded definitions power, emphasized sexuality and experience, and it brought to the fore the relationship between social theory and theories of the unconscious (see Hall 282). As Stuart Hall puts it, "As a thief in the night, feminists broke in; interrupted, made an unseemly noise, seized the time, [and] crapped on the table of cultural studies" (282).

The pejorative associations of Hall's metaphor are self-evident, and I won't dwell on them here. But I do want to argue that feminism, women, and the feminine in composition need to create a similar interruption and disturbance. And I see cultural studies approaches to composition, with their emphasis on power, politics and subject formation, full of possibilities for feminist composition studies. However, feminist strategies have yet to figure prominently in this promising landscape, and I want to discuss briefly three issues which we need to consider in more depth if we are to realize the radical possibilities of cultural studies for feminist work in composition.

First of all, composition, because it is a <u>feminized</u> feild, is

a radically different terrain than cultural studies. Now, a close scrutiny of institutional practices and constraints has always been a primary concern for cultural critique. Yet discussions of incorporating cultural studies in the composition classroom rarely consider how gendered division of labor in our field, its feminization, shapes the production, circulation, and reception of cultural critique in the composition classroom. That is, feminists and women teaching composition are both in the center and on the margins of the feil. We are at the center because, as Sue Ellen Holbrook, Susan Miller, and Elizabeth Flynn have shown, women's work figured prominently in the founding of composition programs and revisionist writing theories and because a disproportionate number of women teach composition courses. Yet women and the feminine are at the margins in composition theory, for many of the positions women hold are low status, non-tenure track, and miserably-paid. Moreover, rhetorical studies have historically othered the feminine in definitions of good writing and explanations of writing processes. From our classical roots through the expressivist rhetorics forwarded by Murray and Elbow, the feminine has been associated with vice, excess and lack of control, a feature of our feil which Miriam Brody chronicles in Manly Writing.

Obviously, this tension between center and margin is testimony to the strange and antagonistic relationship between composition and feminism. Yet such a position affords the feminist cultural

critic a powerful opportunity; as bell hooks notes, the tension between the intersections of the margin and center create a space for resistance, a possibility for transgression (qtd in Rose 151). For example, my experiences as a "call staffer" or adjunct instructor have given me a clear sense of the feminine position in composition, and I am convinced that the often reactionary and strident critique of politics in the classroom is closely linked with composition's strange link to the feminine. In recent history, composition has clearly been defined as women's work, and the threat of transforming composition from a service course to a course with a "content," to a course engaging in public issues and rhetoric threatens women's relegation to the private realm. Changing the meaning of literacy means changing the role of women in language teaching.

This brings me to a second issue important in redefining the territories of cultural studies and composition. The histories of cultural studies and critical education theory, which is closely aligned to it, is markedly paternal. I ribbed Jim Berlin on several occasions because though Cultural Studies in the English Classroom, which he edited with Michael Vivion, includes some excellent discussions of feminism, his introduction, a "Provisional Definition" of cultural studies, discusses the work of a dozen or so male theorists, but only mentions one woman--Gayatri Spivak, and she's not even included in the works cited list! The fact is that despite the influence of feminist praxis on cultural critique, many

models of culture remain largely uniformed by feminist theories of patriarchy (Schiach). For example, feminists have long struggled with the Althusserian framework informing cultural studies because it privileges the economic in constructions of inequality and often naturalizes a sexual division of labor. Elspeth Probyn offers a strong critique of these approaches and ways in which they often take on a neutral voice, a voice barely masked as masculine (2). That voice is quite clear in the work of many critical educators who forward what Lil Brannon calls a "masculine heroic narrative" of the teacher as "critical warrior" (460). This position allows the male teacher to "profit" from patriarchal structures that valorize the autonomous, charismatic male--a position certainly not afforded me or any other female teacher who is in a highly conflicted role as both cultural critic and woman. Brannon argues that critical educators masculinize the feminine values of caring by "emphasizing intellectual rigor and political aggression rather than the empathy of affective consciousness raising" (460).

While I share Brannon's concern, and while there is certainly a paucity attention given to the ways feminist teachers can negotiate their conflicted positions in the writing class, feminist cultural studies approaches can help us break down the binary between the political and the personal. Feminist cultural studies can help students understand the relationship between their individual needs and those of their social conditions. And certainly many current discussions of cultural studies approaches

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

have been invaluable to feminist goals, for they stress questions of gender and its complex interconnection to other marginalized positions. However, formalist approaches to reading and writing have figured prominently in our architecture, and this brings me to the third issue that requires feminist revision in cultural studies approaches to composition: Though the objects of attention have shifted to race, class, and gender, many current strategies for the composition classroom reflect the masculinist impulse of formalist approaches. For the sake of brevity, let me examine only one here. In "Writing About Difference: Hard Cases for Cultural Studies" Richard Penticoff and Linda Brodkey propose an introductory composition course in which students study and write about law cases that represent some aspect of racial, class or sexual difference. The goal of the course is to teach students the ways in which difference is discursively formed in our culture, yet Penticoff and Brodkey exclude students' affective reactions to the law cases. Their syllabus "discounts personal opinions as irrelevant to the practice of conducting rhetorical inquiry, however important they may or may not be in a writer's own experience" (141).

Obviously, Penticoff and Brodkey's institutional constraints may have led to such policy restrictions, but I see in their approach, along with many other overtly political approaches, a kind of mind/body split, which feminist theory has long worked against. There is an assumption that just simply thinking

rationally about gender issues will transform our students' perspectives. But excluding students' affective alliances, the desires, fantasies, and pleasures that are integral to their relationship to cultural texts, confines resistance to an outgrowth of rational thinking. Yet, as Elizabeth Ellsworth has argued, calling for empowering students often means calling of the logic of rationalism, which is frequently predicated on the exclusion of socially constructed others--women, people of color, and nature (96).

I am not arguing here that all logic forwards a colonizing phallocentricity. But in a cultural studies approach, the accepted terms of common sense in our culture must always be critiqued in negotiation with the fragmented nature of subjectivity--our and our students' often unconscious desires. I think that feminist work on the body and on revisionary psychoanalysis is vital at this moment in cultural studies approaches to composition if we are to move beyond a formalist impasse. We can look to materialist feminist cultural studies, to, for example, Teresa Ebert's or Elizabeth Grosz's feminist revisions of Lacanian theory, to clarify the affective alliances inherent in the kinds of resistance all teachers, and particularly women and feminist teachers, meet in the composition classroom. As Balsamo argues, the best feminist work on theorizing the role of desire, the body, fantasy, and pleasure in cultural contexts breaks down a mind/body split and refigures the interrelatedness of both (64).

The issues I've raised here only begin to map a feminist cultural studies approach to composition, but without considering women's labor in our feminized field, without resisting cultural studies' paternal history, without reconfiguring the relationship between logic and emotion, mind and body, public and private, cultural studies runs the risk of commodification, of being reduced to a formula for decoding texts without contexts, of simply presenting the trendy trinity of race, gender, and class as assignment topics. In a cultural studies approach, we are asking our students to become theorizers of their own experience--a vital agenda in days of what Esquire magazine has labeled "Do Me Feminism," a "new" feminism with an attitude. The passivity implied by "do me" is evident in much of our students' writing and can quickly be reinforced by masculinist approaches to cultural studies and composition. An integration of feminist theory is vital at this moment in the relationship of cultural studies and composition if we are to become our own cartographers, mapping change on our own terrain.

Works Cited

Balsamo, Anne. "Cultural Studies and the Undergraduate Literature Curriculum." Cultural Studies in the English Classroom. James Berlin and Michael Vivion, Eds. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook Heinemann, 1992. 145-63.

---. "Feminism and Cultural Studies." The Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association 24.1 (1991): 50-73.

Berlin, James. "Composition Studies and Cultural Studies: Collapsing Boundaries." Into the Feil: Sites of Composition Studies. Anne Ruggles Gere, Ed. New York: MLA, 1993. 99-116.

Brannon, Lil. "(M)other: Lives on the Outside." Written Communication 10.3 (1993): 457-65.

Brody, Miriam. Manly Writing: Gender, Rhetoric, and the Rise of Composition. Edwardsville, IL: Southern Illinois UP, 1994.

Daumer, Elizabeth and Sandra Runzo. "Transforming the Composition Classroom." Teaching Writing: Pedagogy, Gender, and Equity. Caywood, Cynthia and Gillian Overing, Eds. New York: State UP, 1987.

De Lauretis, Teresa. Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1984.

Ebert, Teresa L. "Ludic Feminism, the Body, Performance, and Labor: Bringing Materialism Back Into Feminist Cultural Studies." Cultural Critique (Winter 1992-93): 5-50.

Ellsworth, Elizabeth. "Why Doesn't This Feel Empowering? Working Through the Repressive Myths of Critical Pedagogy." Feminisms and Critical Pedagogy. Carmen Luke and Jennifer Gore, Eds. New York: Routledge, 1992. 90-119.

Flynn, Elizabeth. "Composition Studies from a Feminist Perspective." The Politics of Writing Instruction: Postsecondary. Richard Bullock and John Trimbur, Eds. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook, 1991: 137-54.

Franklin, Sara, Celia Lury and Jackie Stacey. "Feminism and Cultural Studies: Pasts, Presents, Futures." Media, Culture, and Society 13 (1991): 172-92.

George, Diana and Diana Shoos. "Issues of Subjectivity and Resistance: Cultural Studies in the Composition Classroom." Cultural Studies in the English Classroom. James Berlin and Michael Vivion, Eds. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook Heinemann,

1992. 200-10.

Grosz, Elizabeth. Jacques Lacan: A Feminist Introduction. New York: Routledge, 1990.

Hall, Stuart. "Cultural Studies and Its Theoretical Legacies." Cultural Studies. Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson, and Paula Treichler, Eds. New York: Routledge, 1992. 277-85.

Holbrook, Sue Ellen. "Women's Work: The Feminizing of Composition." Rhetoric Review 9.2 (1991): 201-29.

hooks, bell. "Eros, Eroticism, and the Pedagogical Process." Between Borders: Pedagogy and the Politics of Cultural Studies. Henry Giroux and Peter McLaren, Eds. New York: Routledge, 1994. 113-18.

Miller, Susan. "The Feminization of Composition." The Politics of Writing Instruction: Postsecondary. Richard Bullock and John Trimbur, Eds. Prosmouth, NH: Bounton/Cook, 1991: 39-54.

Morris, Meghan. The Pirate's Fiancee: Feminism, Reading, Postmodernism. New York: Verso, 1988.

Penticoff, Richard and Linda Brodkey. "'Writing About Difference': Hard Cases for Cultural Studies." Cultural Studies in the English Classroom. James Berlin and Michael Vivion, Eds. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook Heinemann, 1992. 123-144.

Phelps, Louis Wetherbee. "A Constrained Vision of the Writing Classroom." Profession 93. New York: MLA, 1993: 46-54.

Probyn, Elspeth. Sexing the Self: Gendered Positions in Cultural Studies. New York: Routledge, 1993.

Rose, Gillian. Feminism and Geography: The Limits of Geographic Knowledge. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1993.

Shiach, Morag. "Feminism and Popular Culture." Critical Quarterly 33.2 (1991): 37-46.

Schilb, John. "Cultural Studies, Postmodernism, and Composition." Contending with Words. Patricia Harkin and John Schilb, Eds. New York: MLA, 1991. 175-188.

Worsham, Lynn. "Writing Against Writing: The Predicament of Ecriture Feminine in Composition Studies." Contending With Words: Composition and Rhetoric in a Postmodern Age. Patricia Harkin and John Schlib, Eds. New York: MLA, 1991. 82-104.